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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 001566

SIPDIS

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NSC FOR DAVID MERKEL

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: ARMENIA: PARLIAMENTARY SESSION ON CONSTITUTION
PROVES LONG ROAD AHEAD

REF: (A) YEREVAN 1352 (B) YEREVAN 1290

Classified By: Ambassador John M. Evans for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) On August 29, the Armenian National Assembly opened a highly-anticipated extraordinary session to debate the GOAM's proposed package of constitutional amendments (reftels). The debate lacked the substantive discussion we (and European observers) hoped would prevail. At times, the discussion degraded into a forum for the participating opposition members to criticize the Kocharian Administration and reprimand the National Assembly leadership for what they perceived as procedural irregularities in the proceedings. National Assembly Speaker Artur Baghdasaryan, who departs August 30 for a Voluntary Study Program in the U.S., will likely move to wrap-up debate before his departure. Despite opposition sniping, the current draft of amendments will likely pass this second reading (septel) and move to a referendum in November. End Summary.

BIGGEST DAY IN MONTHS FOR THE PARLIAMENT

[1](#)2. (C) On August 29, the Armenian National Assembly (NA) opened the highly-anticipated extraordinary session to debate the GOAM's proposed package of constitutional amendments (ref A). Not since the public hearings on Nagorno-Karabakh earlier this year have Armenia's public, press and political elite focused so much attention on the National Assembly. The governing coalition (represented by Parliament Speaker Artur Baghdasaryan and Deputy Speakers Vahan Hovansian and Tigran Torossian) led the second reading of the amendments package. A total of 110 of the current 131 MPs participated in the session. (Note: As of 1830 local time, the National Assembly was still in session. End Note.)

OPPOSITION SHOWS UP -- FOR THE CAMERAS OR FOR THE CONTENT?

[1](#)3. (C) At times, the discussion degraded into a forum for attending opposition members to criticize the Kocharian Administration and reprimand the National Assembly leadership for what they perceived as procedural irregularities in the proceedings. A handful of opposition leaders participated in the session. Republic Party leader Aram Sarkissian (one of the most outspoken critics of the process) did not attend. Demirchian did not actually appear in Parliament, but is reportedly watching the proceedings from his office there.

[1](#)4. (C) Justice Bloc deputy Victor Dalakian attempted to de-rail the session altogether. He claimed that irregularities in the punctuation of the draft amendments could call into question whether the deliberations were over whether to amend the previous constitution or adopt a totally new document (which could, according to his analysis, allow President Kocharian to run for a consecutive third term). Coalition representatives, including Deputy Speaker Tigran Torossian, were quick to dismiss Dalakian's accusations. Others, including NA Speaker Artur Baghdasaryan, chastised opposition MPs both publicly and in private for attempting to thwart dialogue and take advantage of the strong media presence to advance their anti-Kocharian agenda.

FAIT ACCOMPLI OR FAIR ATTEMPT?

[1](#)5. (C) Presidential Senior Advisor Armen Harutounyan told us on the margins of the session that the final decision over the constitution had "already been made days ago" and suggested that the proceedings were little more than a formality. He said that the President had dispatched him to the hearings in case there was a need for a speech supporting the amendments. Orinats Yerkir MP Mher Shaghelian painted a different picture of the discussions, trying hard to convince the MPs (and media) present that the hearings were evidence

of a fair, open dialogue on the amendments package.

COMMENTS: IT'S TIME TO PLAY NICE

16. (C) While it is likely that the current draft of amendments will pass this second reading and move to a referendum in November, the August 29 hearings confirmed our concerns that the Armenian political elite -- both in the governing coalition and opposition -- is not yet giving this issue the mature discussion that it merits. Despite the challenges, we believe strong USG support for a transparent process that preserves the intent of the Venice Commission revisions will aid efforts to bring the amendments to referendum, though public complacency and unrealistically high voting thresholds for the referendum remain a problem. During the August 29 session, both deputy speakers thanked Emboff for the USG's public calls for substantive discussion. They were particularly enthusiastic about Secretary Rice's August 25 telephone call to President Kocharian and the Ambassador's August 27 op-ed.
EVANS